



## Solutions Series: 5

# Mock The Weak: The Representation of Disabled People in the media

The Solutions Series is series of pop up Think Tanks hosted by the Independent Living in Scotland project (ILiS). Each Think Tank brings people together in coproduction to seek solutions to a specific barrier to independent living. This is the fourth report in the Solutions Series.

“Mock The Weak – the representation of disabled people in the media” sought solutions to both the under representation and misrepresentation of disabled people in the media. This report reflects the discussion on the day and not necessarily the views of ILiS.

1. Summary of solutions	2
2. Background to the Solutions Series	4
3. The issue: the under and misrepresentation of disabled people in the media	5
4. The discussion	8
5. The solutions	11
6. Next steps	15
<b>Appendix 1</b> Independent living, equality and human rights – an understanding	17
<b>Appendix 2</b> list of participants	18

### Acknowledgements

ILiS would like to express our thanks to all the participants for their contributions to the Think Tank. We would especially like to thank Douglas Fraser, Economic Editor at BBC Scotland, for agreeing to chair the Think Tank.

Thank you also to Kainde Manji for reporting and editing support.

**Look out for more reports from The Solutions Series at [www.ilis.co.uk](http://www.ilis.co.uk)**

## 1. SUMMARY OF THE SOLUTIONS

**The solutions identified and highlighted in this report originate from a variety of organisations and individuals. As such, they do not necessarily represent the only way forward.**

**Below is a summary of key solutions identified. You can find out more about each of them at Section 5.**

### a) Training and influencing

Institutions such as Universities engaged in teaching journalism, radio & TV production should be approached to include training on the representation of disabled people in the media in their courses. A roadshow of disabled people could tour universities and colleges, to deliver this, and to connect Disabled People's Organization (DPOs) and media students. This roadshow could also look at and rate, the facilities available to support disabled people to learn at such institutions – in an approach similar to the one Stonewall uses.

Face to face meetings should be set up locally between disabled people and working journalists – to build relationships and to build connections, providing support to each other on ways to set a realistic and accurate agenda. These meetings should also include a guaranteed story for the journalist as a hook to make best use of their limited time.

Freelance journalists should be approached to help train/advise DPOs on how the media works. DPOs should also offer them a story (which could help influence the portrayal of disabled people in the media) in return.

With limited resources, it is a good idea to influence the regulators rather than simply to respond to each incident of misrepresentation of disabled people in the media'. Now is a good time to influence the regulation of the media. A rapid response team of DPOs (and their allies) should be set up to report misrepresentation to the regulators.

There should be more opportunities for disabled people to be in the media, as actors, employees and specialists, including via mentoring, job shadowing and internships for disabled people in organisations of the media and for representatives of the media, in DPOs.

---

## 1. SUMMARY OF THE SOLUTIONS *Continued*

---

### b) Social Media

The media and DPOs should jointly approach the Government to ensure that increased digital participation of disabled people is a government priority. Larger media organisations could also support increased digital participation by offering training on social media to DPOs and/or working with the Government to increase digital participation.

### c) Co-production

A forum should be set up – based on the principles of coproduction – to facilitate on-going, honest and open lines of communication between disabled people and representatives of the media, and to offer feedback. The forum should also link with governance structures and work on a number of different issues from portrayal to participation.

A directory of DPO contact details, to include a quick reference ‘do’s and don’ts when working with DPOs’, should be developed and distributed to organisations of the media. A directory for DPOs should also be developed. This should include contact details of organisations of the media and a quick reference ‘do’s and don’ts when working with the media’ guide. These resources could be both hard copy or online.

### d) Structures and practice

Flexible and accessible working practices within organisations of the media should be promoted to support access and participation of disabled people. DPOs or existing disabled employees could work with Governance structures in the media to help make this happen.

---

## 2. BACKGROUND TO THE SOLUTIONS SERIES

---

**The Independent Living in Scotland (ILiS) project is working with the Scottish Government, disabled people and other key stakeholders on the strategic interventions that will make independent living the reality for disabled people in Scotland (see appendix 1 for detail on independent living and human rights).**

“The Solutions Series” which is hosted by ILiS is a series of solution focused discussions – ‘pop up think tanks’ – designed to bring together DPOs, decision makers, academics, public service leaders and other key experts from across Scotland and beyond. Each pop up Think Tank in The Solutions Series will consider, and seek solutions to, a specific issue which has been identified as preventing or hindering the progress of independent living in Scotland.

Each Solutions Series discussion will result in a report, capturing the solutions offered. This will be used to promote wider awareness and understanding of the issue and to influence and direct change at national and local level.

**This is the report of the fifth pop up Think Tank in The Solutions Series: “Mock the weak – the representation of disabled people in the media”** which took place on the 18th of December, 2013. The think tank was chaired by Douglas Fraser (Business and Economy Editor, BBC Scotland). A full list of participants is provided at appendix 2.

### 3. THE ISSUE: *The Misrepresentation and Under-Representation of Disabled People in the Media*

**The term ‘media’ is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “the main means of mass communication (television, radio, and newspapers)” and by Wikipedia as “technologies through which communication takes place” – this also includes social media.**

Media is an important part of our everyday life, it is critical in the dissemination of information to the mass population. In doing this, it holds a strong influence over society, reaches many people, and shapes attitudes; “setting the tone of national thought and debate”. Recently, and most publicly as part of the Leveson inquiry, this influence has come under scrutiny. The relationship between the media and disabled people however, has long been turbulent.

**“The press provides an essential check on all aspects of public life. That is why any failure within the media affects all of us”.**

Lord Justice Leveson opening the hearings of the Leveson inquiry on the 14th of November 2011

### 3. THE ISSUE *Continued*

**Disabled people are both under-represented and misrepresented in the media:**

- Disabled people are often defined or portrayed as free-loaders, scroungers, skivers, ‘poor wee souls’, miracles or ‘super human’ ...and some Government ideology/policy/rhetoric drives this.
- There are poor links between disabled people, their organisations and the media.
- Disabled people don’t come forward to be in the media very often – they are frightened that if they do, they may lose what support they have, they might be seen as ‘too capable for support/benefits’ or they fear they might get bullied, harassed or experience hate crime.
- Despite this, talent spotters have limited ‘go-to’ lists and disabled people rarely feature on these – when disabled people are engaged, the same people or person can be over-used.
- Where they are approached, disabled people are usually invited to comment/appear as ‘users’, they are rarely considered or approached as ‘experts’.

It has been widely suggested that the under-representation of disabled people in the media, has contributed to their misrepresentation. There are a number of possible reasons for this under-representation, including issues relating to the lower numbers of disabled people in employment in general (46.9% of disabled people are employed, compared to 71% non-disabled adults<sup>1</sup>, disabled people are

less likely to have a degree and more likely to have no qualifications than non-disabled people<sup>2</sup>). However within the media industry this rate is even lower. This suggests that some particular issues may exist within the industry, which could include recruitment styles and work patterns (which are more ad hoc, fluid and unsociable than in other industries)<sup>3</sup>.

1) Annual Population Survey, 2010

2) Scottish Government; “Disability Evidence Review”, 2013

3) <http://www.creativeskillset.org/research/overview/industries>

### 3. THE ISSUE *Continued*

In addition, engagement between disabled people and their organisations and the media is not as strong as it could be. DPOs represent disabled people, support them to have their voices heard and to influence local and national attitudes and decision making, taking a human rights based approach. They are potentially a key resource for the media, but remain under-utilised. This is partly due to the capacity of under-funded/under-resourced DPOs

to build links with the media or to respond to media requests – particularly when they are often made at short notice. The limited time the media in turn have to develop stories and secure sources, particularly in a climate of tightening resources may, contribute to this. However, this is also partly due to the sorts of stories the media want being different from the sorts of stories that DPOs see as a priority for them and their members.

#### **All of this has a huge impact on disabled people and on the media:**

- Disabled people and their organisations struggle to get their version of events across. Progressing disabled people's equality and human rights is harder because the focus is on welfare, dependency and on the limited role that disabled people can play in society as benefactors, rather than contributors. The focus given to disabled people by the media often accentuates the negative rather than the positive.
- Misrepresentation has created a 'crisis of identity' for disabled people, hate crime has increased and disabled people have lowered aspirations.
- The media don't benefit fully from the expertise of disabled people – as colleagues, employees and contributors on and off screen.
- There is a lack of disability awareness in the media and very little awareness among disabled people and their organisations of the way the media works.

### 4. THE DISCUSSION

**The Think Tank considered the following broad questions:**

**a) What do we want to achieve?**

**b) How do we do it?**

**c) Who can help?**

**The chair welcomed the group and noted that there was to be no 'them and us'; there are barriers to positive portrayal from the points of view of both disabled people and the media. This pop up think tank was about moving forward, to find solutions to these. The conversation was wide-ranging and presents a useful starting point and direction for further work.**

#### **a) Portrayal**

There was much discussion about the portrayal of disabled people in the media including acknowledgement that, over time, things have changed for the better. In particular, it was noted that disabled people are now appearing more often in the media and that DPOs are getting better at understanding and responding to the needs of the media. However, it was noted that there are still concerns in

relation to the overall portrayal of disabled people in the media and the connections between the media and DPOs.

Specifically, it was felt that positive issues relating to disability tend not to be given the same level of profile in the media as activities by other groups. This feeds the perception that people are not interested in disability unless it is associated with tragedy, 'scrounging' or overcoming adversity. It was reported that this is despite the fact that The Guardian – who on balance promoted relatively positive images of disabled people – report a spike in readership when they cover issues of disability. This suggests that such stories are indeed newsworthy.

Whilst coverage of the Paralympics was considered to have been largely positive, it was also felt that it created a new, and in some cases, unrealistic image of disabled people, for example, as 'superhuman'. Some felt that this has been used against disabled people. The then Minister for Disabled People, Maria Miller MP's reference to the images of the Paralympics as evidence that ALL disabled people can work if given the right encouragement was one such example. This failed to address issues of the right support e.g. access to benefits such as Disability Living

---

## 4. THE DISCUSSION *Continued*

---

Allowance (DLA) – support that some Paralympian’s have since credited as a key factor in making their success possible.

This generalisation of circumstances was thought to be fairly typical of the issues disabled people have with their portrayal in the media. It was noted that where the media consider, sometimes correctly, that a report is ‘accurate’ – a standard the media protect and promote – they consider it appropriate to cover, sometimes on that basis alone. However, disabled people noted that ‘accurate’ information, that may or may not be ‘representative’ but is portrayed as if it were, can lead to stereotypes being drawn. Given that for many non-disabled people their only experience of disabled people is through what they see in the media, it was felt important to strike the right balance between a good story and image, and a representative story and accompanying image. However, with little guidance from and contact with DPOs, organisations of the media are left without support to help them draw this distinction. They are left simply with questions of accuracy, on which to base their case for coverage.

### **b) Participation**

The lack of contact between DPOs and organisations of the media means there are fewer disabled people for the media to ‘go to’ – for support and stories. It was felt that this under-participation and under-representation makes it difficult for DPOs to influence the media.

The lack of participation and representation serves to compound public and media attitudes towards disabled people. It also results in disabled people only ever being called upon to talk about/cover disability issues and rarely as experts in other things. It was also noted that where disabled people are represented e.g. on boards, or as employees of the media, it shouldn’t be assumed that they will want to be pigeonholed as the ‘disability issues’ person/people, but should be empowered to address a range of different issues.

The difficulties faced by DPOs in keeping in touch with and responding to the media were acknowledged (issues of capacity, resources and so on). It was also noted that the media (print journalists in particular) are facing particular pressures at the

---

## 4. THE DISCUSSION *Continued*

---

moment due to falling circulation, and fewer jobs in the newsroom. This means that many journalists no longer have the luxury of being able to develop expertise. As a result there are fewer specialists and fewer people with the time to build relationships and support the capacity of DPOs.

Social media has an increasing role in setting the agenda for the media. Some disabled people have been able to successfully use social media to get their version of events across, for example the Spartacus report<sup>1</sup> a multi-authored publication on the implication of changes to DLA and other benefits cuts for disabled people, authored by disabled people from across the UK. Social media also represents a potential way around the issues of capacity associated with DPOs participation in the media. However, it was noted that many disabled people’s level of digital participation, including their access to social media platforms such as Facebook, is lower than non-disabled people’s thus limiting the potential of this means to influence the agenda. Addressing digital participation will therefore be important to increasing disabled people’s access to the media.

### **c) Regulation**

Building on the earlier discussion on accuracy vs. representation, there was some discussion around standards for regulation. It was agreed that the popular media cannot and should not be ‘PR’ agents for any group and that it is not their job to promote a positive image, but an accurate and fair one. A human rights based approach to regulation was discussed. This, it was felt, could help to clarify issues of fairness, accuracy and representativeness.

Acknowledging this, it was also noted that there should be some responsibility on the media to think critically about stories. In particular the use of discredited statistics by media organisations with perceived political agendas was considered problematic. It was also noted that DPOs have a responsibility to understand that there is a balance to be drawn between portraying individuals and their stories for public interest, and representative stories about disabled people. Supporting the media to draw this distinction and balance their coverage in a way that supports the principle of public interest, whilst also protecting and promoting the human rights of disabled people was considered essential.

1) Annual Population Survey, 2010

---

## 5. THE SOLUTIONS

---

**The Think Tank identified a number of possible solutions to the issues identified in section 4. These could work either in isolation or as a parcel of activities towards the changes needed.**

**The solutions listed here came from different participants at the Think Tank and do not necessarily represent an agreed, nor the only, way forward. They should be considered as some among a number of possible ways to drive forward action.**

### a) Training and influencing

Given the lack of capacity of DPOs and of the media it was felt that training was essential. This training would aim to influence accurate and representative coverage, supporting the principle of public interest, whilst also protecting and promoting the human rights of disabled people.

Influencing media students is an early and effective way to do this. Institutes who teach journalism (the National Council for Training of Journalists, the BBC Academy and so on...) should be lobbied to include such training in

the curriculum. A roadshow of disabled people should be developed to feed into this training. The roadshow would tour universities and colleges to train media students, as part of their overall media training. It should highlight some of the issues around representing disability in the media, and would also help build connections between disabled people and the media. It was suggested further that this roadshow take the opportunity to rate the educating institutions on their accessibility and openness for disabled people, by developing a rating scheme, similar to that which Stonewall uses – after-all, an important means to influence the media will be from within and disabled people will find it harder to ‘get in’ if they find it hard to get access to studying it.

In addition, for practising journalists, rather than host a large, catch-all event (which was thought to be too public, expensive and potentially threatening) it was thought that face to face meetings should be set up locally between disabled people and representatives of the media. These would help build relationships, where each could support one another to understand what a realistic, fair, accurate and publicly interesting agenda could look like. The meetings could also include a guaranteed story for the media representative.

---

## 5. THE SOLUTIONS *Continued*

---

Given the time pressures on them, and the need for disabled people and their organisations to get their version of events across, this would make best use of the time and opportunity for all involved.

The capacity of DPOs to understand the pressures on and the needs of the media is limited. So too is the capacity of the media to help build this. Freelance journalists often have more time to commit to this sort of work and to build relationships. It was suggested therefore that as a starting point, freelance journalists could be approached to help train/advise DPOs on how the media works. In addition, freelance journalists are often looking for stories and so, in turn, DPOs could offer a useful resource to the freelancer. This would help freelance journalists to get stories, build relationships and understand disability issues better; and would help DPOs with some of the gaps in their knowledge and capacity, and enable them to influence the agenda.

With limited resources all round, it was considered helpful to influence the regulators rather than simply to respond to each individual story/journalist/representation. This influencing would need to take account of the fact that different parts of the media are regulated in different ways. For example Ofcom has

different powers and jurisdictions than the BBC Trust. It was noted that now is a good time to do this and that a rapid response team of DPOs (and their allies) should be set up. This team would report misrepresentation and influence the regulation of the media so that accuracy, fairness, representation and public interest were understood and balanced appropriately in coverage.

Lastly, it was felt there should be more opportunities for disabled people to be in the media – as employees, actors and specialists. Mentoring, job shadowing and internships for disabled people in organisations of the media could help support this. It would also be useful for representatives of the media to be more involved in DPOs in similar ways. This would help to influence perceptions and attitudes in both directions, through ongoing dialogue and direct experience.

### b) Social Media

Social media was felt to be an effective way to influence the agenda and disabled people and their organisations should be encouraged to utilise it. It is therefore important to increase the digital participation of disabled people to help make best use of this resource.

---

## 5. THE SOLUTIONS *Continued*

---

It was felt that the media and DPOs should approach the Government, jointly, to encourage them to make digital participation of disabled people a priority.

In addition, it was suggested that larger media organisations could support this by; offering training on social media to DPOs and/or working with the Government to increase digital participation.

### **c) Co-production**

Influencing fairer and more representative reporting means ensuring the media understand the real issues for disabled people, that disabled people understand the media, and that everyone knows what support is available and how to get it.

A forum – based on the principles of coproduction – to facilitate on-going, honest and open lines of communication between disabled people and representatives of the media, and to offer feedback, should be set up. This forum should act as a central point of contact for the media

and for DPOs. It could also link with governance structures within organisations of the media, and work on a number of different issues from portrayal to participation.

Knowing who to contact and when is an important part of setting the media's agenda in an accurate and 'publicly interesting' way. In addition, mistakes and misunderstandings can also be the result of limited time to research a subject matter, contacting the wrong media outlet or giving the wrong information at the wrong time. As such, a directory of DPO contact details, to include a quick reference 'do's and don'ts when working with DPOs', should be developed and distributed to organisations of the media to help with this. Similarly, a complementary directory of contact details of organisations of the media, to include a quick reference 'do's and don'ts when working with the media', should be developed for DPOs. These resources could be both hard copy or online.

---

## 5. THE SOLUTIONS *Continued*

---

### **d) Structures and practice**

In addition to mentoring, internships and job shadowing opportunities, having more disabled people working in the media will help to address the capacity of the media to respond to issues on disability.

Flexible, equitable and accessible working practices within organisations of the media should be promoted to support such access and participation of disabled people.

Creating a culture of dignity and respect is crucial for this, as it creates a comfortable environment for all employees, making life easier for disabled people to work there and empowering them to declare their disability status when they do. It was agreed that such cultures are set or condoned by leadership and that corporate buy-in is essential. To support this, it was suggested that DPOs should work with employers/senior managers and governors to help them understand the benefits of nurturing such a culture.

---

## 6. Next Steps

---

The promotion of accurate and fair reporting is essential to ensuring the media maintain their role as key informers in our society. To help make this happen, it will be important that disabled people and the media better understand how each other work and how to get the balance between public interest and the human rights of disabled people, right. Better and closer relationships between disabled people, their organisations, and organisations of the media were considered to be crucial to this, and other solutions.

Making this happen will involve developing and delivering training for DPOs and for the media. It will also involve addressing the representation of disabled people in the media workforce, in the 'go to' list of the media and in the use of digital media.

For this reason it is suggested that the first step should be to set up a multi-member forum (see solution 'c' on the previous page) and that their first task should be to develop the directories (also suggested at solution 'c' on the previous page).

Several of the solutions outlined could be made to work in isolation if necessary, or together as part of a combined approach towards making change happen. Whilst ILiS will work with key stakeholders to help progress some of the solutions suggested, it is hoped that this report will also inspire others to act together towards change.

---

## 6. Next Steps *Continued*

---

### **The ILiS project February 2014**

**Email: [contact@ilis.co.uk](mailto:contact@ilis.co.uk) Website: [www.ilis.co.uk](http://www.ilis.co.uk)**

**As well as visiting our website, why not call in on us via Facebook and Twitter and tell us your independent living news and views?**

**Don't forget to like us!**

 **@independentlivinginscotland**

 **@ilisproject**

---

## APPENDIX 1

---

### Independent living, equality and human rights – an understanding

**Independent Living is defined by disabled people themselves as meaning “disabled people of all ages having the same freedom, choice, dignity and control as other citizens at home, at work, and in the community. It does not mean living by yourself, or fending for yourself. It means rights to practical assistance and support to participate in society and live an ordinary life”.**

For many disabled people, this practical assistance and support (such as access to the environment, advocacy, personal assistance, income, and equal opportunities for employment), underpinned by the principles of independent living, freedom, choice, dignity and control is essential for them to exercise their rights and duties of citizenship, via their full and equal participation in the civic and economic life of Scotland.

Without it, many disabled people cannot: enjoy the human rights they are entitled to on an equal basis to others (as set out in the Human Rights Act and the European Convention of Human Rights); live their lives free from discrimination and harassment as the Equality Act 2010 promotes; nor contribute to a wealthier and fairer, healthier, safer and stronger, smarter and greener Scotland.

Independent living thus promotes a modern understanding of disability and disability equality that can support policy and practice to protect the human rights of disabled people. It achieves this by recognising the essential role of “material support” in ensuring disabled people can “participate in society and lead an ordinary life”.

The role independent living plays in protecting the human rights of disabled people is recognised and underpinned by international human rights and equalities obligations to which the UK and Scotland are party to; including the recognition that all of the rights outlined in the ECHR and Human Rights legislation belong to disabled people, and that these are further strengthened and contextualised by the rights set out in the UNCRPD.

---

## APPENDIX 2

---

<b>Carron Munro</b>	Talent Associate, STV
<b>Cheri Burns</b>	Social Media Moderator/Marketeer, Media Scotland
<b>Douglas Fraser</b>	Business and Economy Editor, Scotland, BBC Scotland (chairing the think tank)
<b>Heather Fiskin</b>	Project Manager ILiS (introducing the think tank)
<b>Kainde Manji</b>	PhD student (reporting the think tank)
<b>Katherine Quarmby</b>	Author of ‘Scapegoat: Are We Failing Disabled People?’
<b>Maggie Maxwell</b>	Development Officer, Creative Scotland
<b>Mairi McLeod</b>	Communications Consumer Panel, advises Ofcom
<b>Mike Jempson</b>	Director, Media Wise
<b>Nick Henderson</b>	Policy and Communications Officer, Glasgow Disability Alliance
<b>Pam Duncan</b>	Policy Officer ILiS (reporting the think tank)
<b>Paul Carter</b>	Director/founder, Littleman Media
<b>Professor Nick Watson</b>	Chair of Disability Studies, Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research
<b>Pru Davies</b>	Volunteer and treasurer, Bi-polar Scotland
<b>Sally Witcher</b>	Chief Executive, Inclusion Scotland
<b>Steve Robertson</b>	Chair, People First Scotland



---

**Solution Series: 5**

---

**Mock The Weak:  
The Representation  
of Disabled People  
in the media**

---

**The ILiS project 2014**

Email: [contact@ilis.co.uk](mailto:contact@ilis.co.uk)

Website: [www.ilis.co.uk](http://www.ilis.co.uk)

As well as visiting our website,  
why not call in on us via Facebook  
and Twitter and tell us your  
independent living news and views?  
Don't forget to like us!



[@independentlivinginscotland](https://www.facebook.com/independentlivinginscotland)



[@ilisproject](https://twitter.com/ilisproject)